

A D D R E S S

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

Medical Society of the State of Pennsylvania,

AT ITS ANNUAL SESSION, JUNE, 1862.

BY

EDWARD WALLACE, M. D.,

PRESIDENT OF THE SOCIETY.

EXTRACTED FROM THE
TRANSACTIONS OF THE MEDICAL SOCIETY OF THE STATE OF PENNSYLVANIA.

PHILADELPHIA:
COLLINS, PRINTER, 705 JAYNE STREET.
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A D D R E S S .

GENTLEMEN OF THE STATE MEDICAL SOCIETY :—

BEFORE proceeding to the discharge of the duty which custom, enforced by a recent enactment of this Society, makes obligatory upon me, permit me to congratulate you, upon the bright and auspicious circumstances under which we have assembled here to-day. Twelve months since, the regular annual session of this Society was postponed, in consequence of the distracted condition of the country, growing out of the *most wicked* and *unnatural* rebellion the world has ever witnessed. The gloom and despondency which then pervaded the entire community, have been happily dispelled, and to-day, though we may not rejoice in the blessings of peace and prosperity once enjoyed, but so inadequately appreciated, we can indulge the confident assurance that the issue of this struggle is no longer *doubtful*; that the Stars and Stripes will ere long be unfurled in the Capital of every State, and that, at no distant period, there will be found in every portion of the land, loyal hearts to respond to the sentiment, “LIBERTY AND UNION, NOW AND FOREVER, ONE AND INSEPARABLE.”

In the winter of 1848, gentlemen connected with the Medical Societies of Chester and Lancaster, inspired by a love for their profession, and anxious to promote its interests, adopted measures for the organization of the State Medical Society, whose anniversary we now celebrate. The necessity for such an organization was not questioned, and the profession was encouraged to expect from it results the most satisfactory and complete. Need I say that these fond anticipations have not been *fully* realized? At our first meeting, held in the city of Lancaster on the 11th day of April, 1848, *twelve* counties were represented, and whilst the attendance has varied at different periods, at no subsequent meeting have more than *eighteen* societies been present, through their representatives. It is gratifying to know that of those participating in its organization *six* societies have never been without a representation, on any occasion, thus giving the best evidence of their heart-felt devotion to its interests, and their steadfast conviction of the benefits that *may*

be derived from it. They are Berks, Chester, Lancaster, Montgomery, Philadelphia, and Schuylkill.

Various reasons have been assigned for the apathy and want of interest manifested by the profession, in the success of this organization, and a few moments devoted to the consideration of this subject, may not be wholly spent in vain. In the early period of its history, committee after committee in the name of this Society, and appointed for that special purpose, appealed to the profession throughout the State, to organize County Medical Societies, urging as inducements, motives of interest, as well as the higher and purer one, of love for the profession of their choice. These appeals so often repeated, have been in a great measure unheeded, and to-day we find a large proportion of the State unorganized, and consequently unrepresented in this body.

The question arises, why is this so? Our annual meetings having been confined to no one locality, the plea of inconvenience in respect to our attendance upon them, cannot be successfully urged. Nor will it be ascribed to the want of attention on the part of those whose hospitality we have shared, and who have been untiring in their efforts to make our visits both pleasant and profitable.

It is no strange thing to hear the question of *utility* raised in respect to County Medical Societies, and it not unfrequently forms an excuse for not being associated with them. The utility of such organizations, *properly conducted*, can scarcely be deemed an open question, nor is it my purpose to go into their defence. With such a dispute their utility, an argument in their favor would avail but little, and with the simple remark that where the advantages are *not apparent*, the fault lies not in the institution, but in the failure of its members *rightly* to discharge their duties, I dismiss its consideration.

The plea of indifference, or the absence of that *esprit du corps* which should characterize every medical man, is usually assigned for the condition of things so much to be deplored. But this is really no solution of the difficulty. Why this indifference on a subject in which it might be fairly presumed every medical man *would* feel some interest?

We are reluctantly driven to the conclusion that our partial success is to be ascribed in a *large* measure to the character of the material out of which the profession is composed. It is greatly to be feared that many young men enter the profession with very mistaken views of its obligations, and of their own fitness for the discharge of its duties. This is due in part to the inducements held out by their preceptors as well as the facility with which a degree can be obtained from *many* of the medical schools.

The prevailing public opinion that when unfitted for either of the other learned professions, a young man is abundantly qualified for the

practice of medicine, is pernicious in its influence, and often leads to unfortunate results. Let it be borne in mind that the possession of a medical degree makes no man a gentleman or a scholar, and that, deprived of the characteristics of these, no man is fitted *rightly* to discharge the obligations incident to his professional career. Failing in this respect, we have the secret of many of the jealousies, heart-burnings, and bickerings which so much distract and disgrace the profession, and which are so often the occasion of that want of harmony and good feeling, which should characterize those whose calling is so benevolent, and to the absence of which must be ascribed many of the difficulties impeding our onward progress. It were folly to disguise the fact that there are many men in the profession who are utterly unworthy of its honors, and who, whilst they discredit the profession, never fail to bring odium on the schools from whence they have emanated. Their object is not the advancement of science, the elevation of the profession, or the good of mankind. If connected with county organizations, they are there to advance their own interests and to conform to their regulations only in furtherance of that purpose. If, as is often the case, they refuse to connect themselves with such bodies, their object is not the less clear or determined. Failing themselves to discharge a duty, they would, by misrepresentation, induce others to do likewise, that they may be the better sustained in their own course of wrong doing, and evade the penalty which, in violating the code of ethics, they so justly merit. If this be not so, how shall we account for the sudden dissolution of societies once flourishing and having a representation in this body, and for the great diminution of others whose decline has been only less rapid? In what other way shall we explain the fact, that after an existence of fourteen years, we are here to day with so small a representation and an apparently diminished interest in our ultimate success?

The code of ethics, sanctioned by the highest professional authority, is but the transcript of the daily conduct of every high-minded, honorable medical man. It requires of no one an abandonment of any right, whilst it demands but the simple recognition of the rights of others. To refuse obedience to its injunctions indicates a radical defect of character; and he who declines association with a county medical society from any such pretext, gives the best possible evidence of his entire unfitness *for* such association.

If, then, I am asked for the remedy for this state of things, my reply is, go to the source of the difficulty and remove it. Let each preceptor feel that there is a responsibility connected with his position as such, and let him nerve himself manfully to meet it. Elevate the standard

of medical character. Demand of students that they *shall* meet the requirements of the American Medical Association. Prolong the course of study requisite to obtain a medical degree, and exclude from county medical societies all who do not conform, *in practice*, to the code of ethics. Let it be understood that it is necessary to be associated with the medical society of the county in which a man resides, that there is no other test by which his loyalty to the profession can be determined, and that exclusion from it shuts him off from all professional intercourse with its members. In thus protecting itself against unworthy membership, the profession will exhibit a determination to guard its own interests; and when, by the adoption of such a course, it can secure its *own* self respect, it may reasonably anticipate the respect and confidence of the public. Until then let us acknowledge our lack of courage to meet a difficulty which we alone can successfully encounter.

If these views seem to some extreme and radical, let it be remembered that the evil is one of magnitude, and demands a remedy of corresponding proportions.

I will only add that a proposition, having reference to the more complete organization of this Society, will be submitted by a gentleman from this city during our present session, and its practical character, and the prospect of success which it holds out, cannot, I am sure, fail to commend it to the favorable consideration of this body.

It cannot have escaped the most careless observer, that on the subject of medicine a *large portion* of the community *will be* humbugged; and not a few wearing the insignia of the profession (to their shame be it spoken) avail themselves of this weakness of the public to reap the rich rewards of its credulity. Men, intelligent upon other subjects, seem in this instance to set aside the dictates of common sense and the ordinary rules by which they are governed in the affairs of life, to give full play to a distempered imagination. There is no absurdity so monstrous as not to find its ready dupes; no conceivable folly that has not its deluded victims. True as this is of the community as a whole, it is perhaps not less applicable to the clergy as a class. Possessing intelligence of no ordinary character, and influenced in their conduct, as we believe, by correct principles, it is not a *little singular* that the cause of error should so often find in them its warmest friends and advocates.

To this general charge there are, I am happy to say, very many honorable exceptions—men who despise quackery, however specious the guise it may wear, and who would not degrade themselves, or their holy calling, by contact with it.

But can it be denied of a large number, that their influence is exerted *against rational medicine*, and in favor of whatever will impede

its progress? Is there any system of practice too absurd to claim their support?

Take as an illustration the infinitesimal humbug of the day; where does it find its most ardent and enthusiastic supporters?

I am aware that it is sometimes charged against the profession, in regard to this particular phase of charlatanism, that we are prejudiced, and that we will not investigate its claims to support. But can this charge be sustained? Has it not been investigated time and again, and greatly to its cost? Has it not been subjected to the most thorough trial in hospital practice, and under the most favorable circumstances? On the other hand are there not some things so absurd as to justify no extended investigation into their nature? Is the Bible to be set aside for the book of Mormon, because some arrant impostor would have it so? Are the clergy to investigate at *great length* the claims of this corrupt system, before excluding from their pulpits its deluded, nay, wicked expounders? It is surely no unreasonable thing to expect that in forming an opinion upon any subject, men should be governed by the results of experience, as well as the deductions of reason. Are we then to set aside the experience of centuries to embrace the vagaries of a visionary enthusiast? Will it be asked of us to abandon a system founded on reason, observation, and experience, to substitute in its stead another, demanding the largest credulity on the part of its votaries? "Must we relinquish all the accumulated treasures of our art, to trifle with life, upon the strength of such fantastic theories?"

We are accustomed to regard the vocation of the physician as one of immense responsibility, and however great his advantages or whatever may be his qualifications, he cannot but feel, at times, the weight of that responsibility, if he be not led to exclaim, "Who is sufficient for these things?" To him are committed the issues of life and death, and on the propriety of the course he adopts, will often depend consequences which eternity alone can properly estimate.

Will it be thought strange, then, that we should enter our solemn protest against this officious interference on the part of those wholly unlearned in the healing art, and who, by their ill-timed advice, are sometimes the occasion of irremediable injury, where they have not mislead their too confiding victims to a premature grave?

Who can calculate the amount of mischief effected by the fraudulent certificates with which the land is flooded, and in which the most monstrous perversions of truth are propagated; and who so ready to affix their signatures thereto, as gentlemen of the clerical profession?

Can it be that there is no moral responsibility attached to an act by which such immense mischief is often accomplished? Can the desire to do good or relieve suffering be a sufficient apology for results so

frequently disastrous in their consequences? In the language of another, "How long will it take mankind to learn that whilst they listen to 'the speaking hundreds and units who make the world ring' with the pretended triumphs they have witnessed, the *dumb millions* of deluded and injured victims are paying the daily forfeit of their misplaced confidence?"

Religion should ever be the handmaid of science, deriving, as it often does from the latter, the most important aid in unravelling its mysteries. That those engaged in inculcating its holy precepts should mistake their duty and cast their influence on the side of error, is a problem of no easy solution, and whilst we may concede honesty of purpose and purity of intention, in so doing, we but compliment the heart at the expense of the head.

Of a kindred character is the practice so often pursued by editors of religious newspapers in giving circulation to the advertisements of nostrum vendors, and, in many instances, puffing them into notice. That the secular press of the day, influenced by the love of gain, should pursue such a course, is not *so much* to be wondered at, though a regard to decency and the morals of their readers, *ought* to exclude from publication many advertisements now having a wide circulation. But where the dissemination of truth is the professed object, we do not expect to find columns filled with the most unblushing falsehoods, in respect to the wonderful powers of some of these remedies. Professing to cure with unerring certainty all the ills to which flesh is heir, they cannot but deceive a class of readers wholly incapacitated to judge of their merits, and who naturally desire to be free from existing maladies.

Many a life is sacrificed to the *simple delay* occasioned by the use of these means, at a time when efficient remedies should have been employed. How far a man becomes "particeps criminis" to the wrong inflicted in such a case is a question which might well be pondered by those implicated in the transaction.

Not long since the *American Presbyterian*, published in this city, contained an able editorial on this subject and in condemnation of the practice so prevalent in newspapers of its class, for which it was very properly commended by the *Boston Medical Journal*. It is greatly to be regretted that like views are not generally entertained on this subject by those having control of the religious press, and that the pecuniary advantage to be gained should so often induce them to forego their honest convictions of duty.

In making these strictures, I desire not to be misunderstood. For religion itself, I entertain the most profound respect, and among its authorized teachers I am happy to number many valued friends. A sense of duty, rather than a desire to censure, has prompted the ex-

pression of these sentiments long since entertained, and which, if I mistake not, will find a hearty response in the profession generally.

The troubles existing in the country have afforded an opportunity for the sublimest display of patriotism, on the part of all her citizens. Ever since the fatal blow upon Fort Sumter, by which the Flag was disgraced and trampled under unhallowed feet, the resolve of loyal men everywhere has been, that the insult should be avenged, and that treason should be punished. And amidst the general burst of enthusiasm and love of country, we cannot but rejoice that the profession has taken so noble a stand, and that as in other days, when clouds have darkened the horizon, where'er her services were needed, there her sons have flocked to minister, and if need be, to die, under the folds of that glorious flag.

Let us indulge the hope, when these difficulties are over, and *when reason shall have resumed her sway*, that, with returning peace and prosperity, the profession now separated, shall be reunited as a band of brothers, whose only emulation shall be to excel in the elevation of the profession, in the advancement of science, and in the amelioration of the Race.

